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Top Story



TOM BERRY/Ledger & Times

County farmer Kenny Overbey prepares to level and clear some land along Coles Campground Road Tuesday afternoon to make way for a crop of beans. According to a recent study by American Farmers Trust, subdivision development around Murray and many other Kentucky cities is threatening some of the state's best farmland.

Report: Farm land threatened; Calloway seeing lots of development, but officials say there's no danger of over-development

By TOM BERRY
Staff Writer

A high level of development around Murray and other Kentucky cities is leading to the loss of some of the state's best farm land, according to a national report. But local officials believe Calloway County is in no immediate danger of overdevelopment.

Although areas of 41 of the state's 120 counties are threatened by the construction of sprawling subdivisions and some industrial development, Calloway is one of only 18 counties in the state listed as under an elevated threat of losing fine farmland, according to American Farmland Trust, a national organization of public and private agriculture leaders working with the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Services.

Calloway is also one of four counties in the Purchase area listed in the report's "high-quality farmland with high development" category. The others being parts of Graves, Marshall and McCracken counties. All other counties in the Purchase area are considered high quality farmland, but face only a low threat of development.

According to the 2002 AFT report, Kentucky lost 80,000 acres of "prime" farmland from 1992 through 1997. The loss, the report says, is growing a rate of about 58 percent annually.

The statistic places the Kentucky 18th among the top 20 states with vital American farmland threatened by development. Texas, Ohio, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Tennessee, Missouri, Alabama, Virginia, Wisconsin, Mississippi, Pennsylvania and Arkansas top the list along with several others.

However, Mark Manning, president of the Murray-Calloway County Economic Development Corporation, said he did not believe that development has reached the level that there would not be adequate farmland available in Calloway County.

"I have dealt with the development of farmland all of my life and certainly when you develop property there is some loss of fine farmland," he said. "The question becomes do you do that in a haphazardous sprawling kind of way or do you try to do it in a planned, balanced development. I would say that in Calloway County we do a pretty good job of balancing the two."

Manning said local development decisions are made with the county's agricultural economy and history in mind.

"We certainly recognize that the agricultural community is the heart and soul of Calloway County. That is where we come from and I don't expect there to be a shortage of farmland anytime soon," he said. "I would certainly agree that we have high quality farmland and high development. The two are not mutually exclusive."

Brent Frazier, a farm easement program manager with the Kentucky Department of Agriculture, said AFT officials work closely with state and county governments nationwide in researching and publishing information in the interest of agriculture that is useful to government, business, and agricultural officials.

However Frazier pointed out that the study tracks only broad trends and should not be used by county and municipal governments as the only guide in making local decisions. "They will tell you that you cannot make a localized interpretation based on the maps. It's just a generalized description of trends that will give you some idea of what is going on in a broad way," he said. "But American Farmland Trust has collected a library of information concerning this issue and it's very good."

For complete story, see today's Ledger & Times

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